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Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas

Nakissa Etemad

Stephen Colella

Marcus Gardley

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Introduction Stephen Colella

The act of making theatre can be a miracle. Bringing our stories, our communities, our collaborators and our imaginations into one small space for a finite time before it vanishes into memory and the ephemeral seems an impossible task. How do we manage it? That's rhetorical, so please quell the urge to reply. The point is, and it's a point we all know, that this form of creation can be an amazing thing.

So what is the adjective we use when a dramaturg goes through this process once and then does it again with the same play and the same playwright a second time? A third time? A fourth time? Now what about when you do all of four of them in the span of a year? Well, I don't think there is one word for it. However, in the words of Bob White, Emma Mackenzie Hillier and Jules Odendahl James, who formed this year's Grants and Awards committee with me, the following phrases were the descriptions they provided in their assessments for the dramaturg and for this work:

- Trailblazing
- Filled with grace under pressure
- Beyond the traditional definition of dramaturgical work
- Pioneering a new model of play development that other dramaturgs could replicate
- Central to the success of this project
- And the phrase that was mentioned most often - unique in the field.

But perhaps I'm a bit ahead of myself. Let's learn a little about this project.

The Lark Play Development Center has a program called Launching New Plays into the Repertoire Initiative. It is a five-year experiment focused on "creating a movement" around selected plays by bringing together theatre producers to launch new plays into national prominence across the United States by creating an arc of at least four productions of each play.

The nationwide pilot program for this initiative started with three play cycles, but only one of them had a dramaturg and that dramaturg is our recipient tonight.

Through the course of this project, the one playwright and one dramaturg collaborated with 62 actors, 18 designers, 6 choreographers and fight directors, 4 directors, 4 stage management teams, 3 composers and countless crew members, technicians and artisans. The playwright/dramaturg team engaged with 8 university classes, 3 universities, 3 high schools, 2 communities of writers, 3 public panel events, 10 community partner groups across 3 cities and 6 audience discussions. The four productions of this play – at Perseverance Theatre in Juneau

Alaska, at the Pillsbury House Theatre in Minneapolis Minnesota, at The Latino Theatre Company of the Los Angeles Theatre Center, and at the University of South Florida's School of Theatre & Dance – had a dramaturg who covered roles as vast and diverse as the geography over which these plays took place. Our recipient facilitated design, assisted in music direction and engaged in copious amounts of research that began with the first production and continued to accrue and grow in each iteration. This dramaturg also functioned as a Native language teacher and coach, a Native customs and choreography consultant, and a Native props and costumes consultant. This individual also promoted the work and the field of dramaturgy through work with university and high school students while also managing a deep and diverse engagement with the different communities that were part of these four productions. Finally, and most importantly, this dramaturg maintained and grew a relationship of trust with the playwright throughout this entire process of creating this work: the road weeps, the well runs dry. In the words of playwright Marcus Gardley...well, maybe it's easier if he talks about this himself. Marcus?

Introduction Marcus Gardley

If the saying is true, that playwrights give birth to worlds – then plays are indeed planets. These planets are planted into pages, warmed in the light that is inspiration, watered with tears, and perhaps spit from cursing at computer screens, but most profoundly these planets are grown not just by the farmer (who is the playwright) but by a host of other laborers, producers, field hands, harvesters and in this case, most profoundly the dramaturg.

When I think of this award and of my frequent collaborator and friend I think of her as a wind song swirling around such planets. In this way she is like a goddess, a beacon of light, a comet, a fierce somebody.

But aren't all dramaturgs like the wind: they carry seeds and leaves and soil to other areas of the planet. Their nature is to be cool at all times. When the director is too direct, when the actors are making a scene because they need to be seen, when producers want to taste the produce of the planet and harvest looks a season away, the dramaturg like the wind breezes by to put the fires out. They move quietly and patiently, waiting for just the right moment to whisper wisdom in the writers ear or tap that director on the shoulder and hand them that bad ass research packet complete with table of contents, cover page, a personal preface, important lines high-lighted and color coded with a key, re-footnoted, reformatted, with thoughts explained in plain English, backed up with an annotated bibliography and a series of related images all in color and paginated. And if the answer is not in the packet it's in their storehouse, that dramaturgical mind that knows just enough about everything to be a work of art.

And unfortunately like the wind, they are often un-heard and unsung, people don't see them sometimes even if they feel them. But we who plant planets, we farmers, builders of plays, we often cannot bring plot to crop without them. We don't often say it – you know farmers can be stubborn, moody, eccentric, difficult, dry yet always good for a drink – we don't often say it but you are a life force to us. You are vital to our ecology. You carry our planets to other galaxies. You above all, get our cosmos. And so tonight, I salute you and one in particular who blows my mind.

The artist that is being honored tonight drifted into my life at a writer's retreat where I was feeling rather blue because my play didn't turn out the way I had hoped. It was fighting me and I was letting it win. However, during a talk back this dramaturg, asked me such thrilling questions about my characters and plot that not only did I run to my housing quarters right after to rewrite the entire thing, I immediately tried to steal her from the writer she was assigned to. And I know I should feel guilty about that... but people keep telling me that the best writers steal so...I stole her. Eventually the play got produced and she joined the creative team as dramaturg for that first production which has now had over a dozen productions across the country. And thus started a ten-year journey with this friend, this fellow artist, foodie, hat lover, soul singer, and travel buddie that has been one of the most rewarding relationships in my life. One of our most recent adventures centered around the national tour of the play that Stephen mentioned: *The Road Weeps, The Well Runs Dry*. This play is the second installment in a trilogy about the migration of Black Seminoles (African and First Nation peoples) from Florida to Oklahoma. At its core, the play is about a group of people whose faith and identity are put to the test when their water well runs dry. Some believe it is an act of God, others believe it is the weather or the work of neighboring tribe. The truth however is revealed when we learn the town recluse, Number Two believes he is immortal and goes on a revenge plot to destroy his arch-enemy who also happens to his ex lover. Yeah, it gets deep.

When the opportunity came to do this ambitious, life-changing project, I knew immediately that I could not do it without my friend and fellow collaborator as dramaturg. But as Stephen mentioned she became that and so much more. She worked with me on the script for four years then found ways to make every production unique to the location where it was being produced. She was there in rehearsal when I couldn't be around and because the project was so massive she became the center of all things, my right hand – and there is no way the project would have been successful without her. All of this and she kept an amazing record of the entire process from start to finish. She even spent time away from her loving husband (who makes the meanest limoncello on the planet) and she was paid so little money she was essentially paying to work. Her sacrifice, hard work and passion for the project and for the theater is infectious. I could not be more proud and elated to celebrate her – this great wind, artist and friend who's laughter could out sparkle Fourth of July. It looks like the planets have aligned for you tonight, thank you for getting in the dirt with me and helping to grow a work that feeds so many. Congratulations.

And so it is with great pride that I announce that the 2015 Elliott Hayes Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dramaturgy will be presented to Nakissa Etemad.

Acceptance Speech: Nakissa Etemad

It is such an honor to be standing here in front of all of you, my colleagues, friends, and family members, to receive the Elliott Hayes Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dramaturgy. I'm especially grateful to receive this award from one of my dearest artistic collaborators and friends Marcus Gardley, and to be part of LMDA's 30th anniversary year, an organization I am so proud to be part of.

At LMDA's 25th Anniversary Conference in BANFF, Alberta, Canada, I joined a session led by my friend and colleague Liz Engelman who asked what made us feel JOY. We heard such a

variety of answers, and then it hit me. I feel joy when I collaborate with a playwright whose vision I fully comprehend and embrace, and for whom I can serve as a muse and partner, to help them express themselves as best they can in reaching their full potential. And that joyful partnership is the one I have with Marcus Gardley. That conference was just before I dramaturged my second Gardley Classic *every tongue confess* for Arena Stage. Now, five years later, we've had eight more collaborations. I've been working as a professional dramaturg for the past 23 years, and Marcus Gardley is a playwright who inspires me to keep going for the next 23 years. He is my theatrical soulmate, and I could not be happier to get this award for my work with him on such a labor of love. His gorgeous, epic play *the road weeps, the well runs dry* is the reason I stand here today. It's all the stuff of great plays rolled into one: a poetic, mythical love story; a vengeful murder mystery; a forgotten history play; a feast of language; a triumphant tragedy; a searing comedy; a magical journey of two cultures coming together to survive all odds for the next generation. It's the middle play of a trilogy, the necessary history of the Seminole Freedmen, also known as Black Seminoles, a culture UN-represented in most American history books, and their founding of the first incorporated all-black town in Oklahoma's Indian Territory. This play tells such a vital story of a struggle for freedom, love and personal identity, a crisis of faith and victory over oppression. It brings disparate cultures together both on and off stage, it moves people of all races and creeds; it needs to be heard.

I had the incredible experience of serving as Marcus's Dramaturg for the four nationwide world premieres of *the road weeps*. It is unusual for an independent, freelance dramaturg to be given the chance to work on such a high-profile project with so many diverse companies and artists, whose common ground is their belief in this playwright and love for his play. It has been an unforgettable journey – and a literal one, as we worked on the play four times in four cities with four separate production teams, casts and community partners, and the only consistent artistic personnel were me and Marcus. The project centers on a play about building a town; four times we built a community of artists to create a community of characters – on the stage, behind the scenes, out in the audiences, and on the streets of all four cities. Working on one world premiere production teaches us so much about a play; to be able to work on three more successive and unique premiere productions is such a gift. I not only had the luxury of time and different perspectives to do even more of the typical dramaturgical tasks, but I became an expert of sorts, especially in the play's Native language, music and customs, teaching songs and Seminole rituals to each cast and doing extensive research and 'mining for gold.' In each city we incorporated cultural inspirations from the different local Native American tribes, such as the Juneau production's Tlingit (Native Alaskan) composer and five cast members. Along our journey, Marcus and I were able to craft the finer details of the play and even experiment with some risky writing choices that could be changed in the following production. As I often do as the dramaturg, for two years on the road I was this play's ambassador and advocate, Marcus' representative, and promoter of my field in all the community engagement events across the country. We could literally watch our impact happen in every community, and allow the play to be influenced by each and every response, every remark and gasp and laughter. It was so gratifying when we presented the play to younger students and non-theater-goers, to see that spark happen in folks stirred by the stories in the play, who were amazed that our professions even existed, who got excited about the idea of a life in the theatre. To see the kids we spoke with from Yaakoosge, Juneau's alternative high school, appear at the preview that same night, or

Florida college students majoring in mass communications to sign up for run crew because of a class I taught months before... It made us feel very proud.

The four partner productions took place at Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, AK, Pillsbury House Theatre in Minneapolis, Latino Theater Co. of LATC, and the Univ. of S. Florida in Tampa, all part of the Launching New Plays into the Repertoire initiative, led by the Lark Play Development Center and funded by the Mellon Foundation, a remarkable program. I am especially grateful to the Lark, and particularly John Eisner, who's here with us tonight, who put Marcus at the center of this project and who said “yes” to having a dramaturg. I want to thank John and the four producing theater institutions and their leaders – Art Rotch, Faye Price, Jose Luis Valenzuela, and Fanni Green – for honoring my collaborative partnership with Marcus in this profound way. And to the hundred plus actors, directors, designers, production teams, artisans, crews, teachers and community partners, thank you for opening your minds and hearts to us and for your indelible help in bringing Marcus’ vision to life.

As this multi-year project kept me on the road with *the road weeps*, I must give thanks to my family in San Francisco for being so supportive during my absence, my parents Galen and Jaleh, my uncle Oroad, my brother Cyrus (thanks for being here today), and especially my amazing husband Michael; I truly could not do any of the work that I do without you. And thanks to my dear friend Ginny Reed for your constant camaraderie, kinship and sage advice.

Dramaturgs spend our lives advocating for plays and playwrights; it is so rare for someone to advocate for us. Marcus, thank you for being my champion. LMDA, thank you for being my tribe. And thank you to this play. I feel like a stronger dramaturg, and this experience has helped me soar to new heights in my craft and in spreading the gospel of dramaturgy.